



Municipal Library,  
NAINI TAL.



Class No. 932

Book No. M 31 A





# ANCIENT EGYPT



# MAETERLINCK

## ESSAYS

Crown 8vo, 6s. each. Pocket edition: Cloth, 3s. 6d. each; Leather, 6s. each.

THE LIFE OF THE BEE      THE BURIED TEMPLE  
THE TREASURE OF THE      THE DOUBLE GARDEN  
HUMBLE  
WISDOM AND DESTINY      LIFE AND FLOWERS

## PLAYS

Globe 8vo, 5s. each. Pocket edition: Cloth, 3s. 6d. each; Leather, 6s. each.

MONNA VANNA      SISTER BEATRICE AND  
AGLAVAIN AND SELVY-      ARDIANE AND BARBE  
SETTE  
JOYZELLE      PELLEAS AND MELIS-  
THE DEATH OF TINTAGILES ANDA AND THE  
AND OTHER PLAYS.      SIGHTLESS

MY DOG: Illustrated in colour by Cecil Aldin.  
Pott 4to, 6s.  
Illustrated in colour by G. Vernon Stokes.  
Imp. 16mo. New edition, 5s.  
OLD-FASHIONED FLOWERS: Illustrated in colour by  
G. S. Elgood, Imp. 16mo. New edition, 5s.  
THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS. Deny 8vo.  
Cloth 2s. Paper, 1s.

HOURS OF GLADNESS. EDITION DE LUXE.  
Illustrated in colour by E. J. Detmold.  
Demy 4to, 25s.

# ANCIENT EGYPT

BY

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

TRANSLATED BY

ALFRED SUTRO

LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.  
RUSKIN HOUSE, 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C.1

*First published in English in 1925*

*Printed in Great Britain by*  
UNWIN BROTHERS, LIMITED, LONDON AND WOKING  
*(All rights reserved)*

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. EGYPT OF TO-DAY . . . . .	0
II. EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART AT THE TIME OF THE PHARAOHS . . . .	19
III. LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT . . . .	35
IV. THE WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS . . . .	48
V. THE SECRET RELIGION . . . .	69
VI. THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE . . . .	83



# ANCIENT EGYPT

## I

### EGYPT OF TO-DAY

IF you are anxious to preserve that idea of the world which you have derived from travellers' stories, from poets' legends, from the dreams of your childhood and youth, you will do well never to cross the threshold of your dwelling. But if you prefer reality, whatever it may be, to the mere visions of fancy, take a trip round the world. You will be disillusioned again and again, but at least you will have learned to see for yourself, you will have formed your own impressions and understood

## ANCIENT EGYPT

things ; and you will note a difference henceforth in your manner of looking at the world, in your feelings, your desires, your troubles, and even your happiness. You will return home wiser and more tolerant ; a cleansing wind will have passed through you that shall for a long time bring peace to your soul. Your surroundings will have become dearer to you : the country in which you were born and the men among whom you live. You will find the existence attractive that had hitherto seemed so unjustly cramped, so dull and monotonous. You will no longer envy those who sail to other shores ; and as the great ships that carry them fade away in the distance there will no longer be envy in your heart, for you will have learned that there are indeed few of the world's wonders that come up to the conception that we have so fondly formed of them.

I was loath to believe it till my own

## EGYPT OF TO-DAY

eyes convinced me, but it is a fact that a few picture postcards, crude and glaring as a railway poster, will give you a very fair idea of Egypt. Obelisks and pyramids, sparse clumps of date-trees with their feathery pollis nodding in every direction ; innumerable dykes, long and straight, and narrow and green, across which undersized donkeys, their outline cut sharp on the great blue sky, are for ever trotting to and fro ; while women with heavy black veils, looking like mourning Madonnas, pass by with a petrol-tin poised majestically on their head, and men hasten along, either half-naked or mussled to the ears in white or red rags ; and the tall camels swing past, languid, haughty, disdainful, balancing themselves as they step from foot to foot, and seeming to count every one of their mighty strides. And all these, save only the camels whose solemn gait nothing can quicken, appear to be in an extra-

## ANCIENT EGYPT

ordinary hurry, on the move all day long, eager to reach some destination that we can never discover, nor indeed do we want to, for as far as the eye can reach there is such monotonous similarity that we have no desire to stir. The water at the foot of the dyke is stagnant, slimy and yellow. Here and there is a primitive mill known as "sakiye," with a couple of small, humpbacked donkeys slowly turning the great wheel, so dilapidated as almost to be falling in pieces as it goes on its creaking round ; while every hundred yards or so a perspiring fellah will be watering his meadow, from sunrise to sunset, by means of the "chadouf," which is still, as it was in the days of the Pharaohs, a mere long flexible rod attached to an old pail or bucket, or perforated basket, which draws up the filthy water and runs it into little mud trenches that are as artless and primitive as those that our children at home dig round

## EGYPT OF TO-DAY

their castles as they play by the seashore.

At regular intervals of a league or so in this vast green plain—where you will find barley, corn, cotton, lucerne, cloves, poppies, sugar-cane, and the clumps of feathery pollis I have already mentioned—there will be a cluster of huts, blackish hovels contrived out of mud and chopped straw, with crazy roofs and tottering walls ; sinister, incredibly dirty, covered with the dust that comes from the great furnaces, holding together only through force of habit and quite ready to collapse at the first shower, like a lump of sugar dissolved in ink. There will be a few donkeys under the dappled shade of a tamarisk-tree ; there will be women in perpetual mourning squatting by the side of the huts, and a group of children, chocolate-coloured and without a rag on them, lying full length in the reddish-brown dust, whilst above all glares the great,

## ANCIENT EGYPT

unpitying sky across which no cloud ever passes. There you have the peasants' villages; the home of the fellah as it has been these last thousand years; and so it is throughout the thousand odd miles from Alexandria to Assouan, the whole length of the valley of the Nile, which will at one place, as at the Delta, be several leagues across, and at another as narrow as a footpath wedged in between savage rocks or eaten away by the red sands of the desert.

The small towns that are lined up along the railroad or the banks of the river are contrived out of the same black mud, with here and there a few houses of raw or baked brick, whitewashed after a fashion, and here and there some sheds and broken-down tenements; while in the midst of these will arise the house, or sort of suburban villa, of the engineer or European official, close to the tall

## EGYPT OF TO-DAY

chimneys of a sugar factory, which give the whole riverside landscape the doleful air of a suburb of one of our own industrial towns.

Such is then, briefly, the aspect of the Egypt of to-day. Can it have been the same in the days of the Pharaohs ? It is not easy to tell, for the wonderfully preserved paintings and bas-reliefs found in tomb and temple never portray landscape. Egyptian art ignores, or disdains, perspective as well as composition of groups ; it concerns itself only with symbolic outline. A tree stands for a forest, a blue line for a river, a flower for a garden. Even the celebrated "Mastaba" of Ti, Intendant of the Vth Dynasty, containing as it does in their miraculous freshness so many minute and delightful details of Egyptian life—hunting, fishing, farming, the rearing of geese and cranes, corn being threshed, labourers, carpenters, harvesters, women toiling in

## ANCIENT EGYPT

the fields, tax collectors, sports and games, oxen crossing a ford, birds, fish, crocodiles, hippopotami, thickets of papyrus in the swamps of the Delta—all these give us but a vague idea of the landscape or the parks of ancient Egypt. Of gardens we find traces only in the terraces of the vast temple of Deir-el-Bahri, built under the XVIIIth Dynasty ; these have stone basins riddled with holes to let the water pass away, and the bas-reliefs in the granite show the massy foliage of the incense-trees, brought at great cost from the Pount country, which stretched along both shores of the Red Sea.

To-day, except in the environs of Cairo, there is not a single tree, other than date-trees and tamarisks, to be found all the way from the Delta to the First Cataract. The sycamore, which was the national, the sacred tree, has completely disappeared, like the papyrus and the lotus, respec-

## EGYPT OF TO-DAY

tively symbolic of the Egypt of the North and South and constantly recurring in ancient paintings. They are now to be found only in botanical and zoological gardens.

The big towns, Alexandria and Cairo especially, are a little disappointing at first, like all the more or less legendary cities we have seen in our dreams, with the glamour of the East upon them. In the European quarter the wealth displayed seems in bad taste, rather trivial and tawdry ; the native quarters, for whose appreciation a long stay is no doubt necessary, strike one at first as curiously miserable and dilapidated ; dirty, dusty, squalid, and infinitely less picturesque and full of colour than we had been led to believe by the descriptions of travellers, who are for the most part no more than well-trained parrots. But it is no business of mine to refute them or to tell again what has been told a

## ANCIENT EGYPT

thousand times ; nor will I dwell here on the mosques or the Arabic art, which would demand a special study and are by no means confined to Egypt.

## II

### EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART AT THE TIME OF THE PHARAOHS

THE truth is that the Egypt of to-day would not, but for the mildness of its climate, long detain either tourist or artist, who so quickly exhaust all that is to be seen in the towns, the river, and country, were it not that behind all these there hovers the prodigious, insoluble enigma of a civilisation that goes back more than seven thousand years and has left on this earth of ours innumerable traces that are as clear, as fresh, as deeply graven, as though they dated from yesterday. There is nothing in the whole world that can compare with the temple at Luxor, the tombs of the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

Valley of the Kings and of Sakhara ; with the pyramids, with the underground vaults of Apis. There is nothing, not even the famous temple of Angkor or the palaces in China, that is so strange, so unexpected, so bewildering, so curiously, disconcertingly human—and human in a fashion that does not seem to belong to this planet of ours. Nowhere in the world can we find an art that is so fantastic and yet so nicely balanced, so barbarous and yet so exquisitely cultured ; an art that wanders with the same graceful ease from the colossal to the puerile, from the sublime to the grotesque ; that produces, now a flimsy sketch, and then a perfect drawing, finished down to the minutest detail ; an art leaping from the most appalling monstrosity to a truth and sincerity that are as delicately real and true, as moving, as any greatest masterpiece painted by man.) No race, no people, not even the people of

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

Greece or China, has set so lasting, so powerful, so ineffaceable a seal upon this earth, or flashed on the world a vision so compact and massive, so absolute, so stupendous, so logical in its apparent illogicality, so immeasurable within its self-imposed limits, so perfectly rhythmic in its own special rhythm. If Egypt had never been ; or if, like Atlantis, all her monuments had disappeared in a planetary catastrophe, the history of this world would be the poorer for one of the most striking manifestations of the human mind, as it is also probable that Grecian art and architecture and those that derive from them would have been vastly different.

Was there beauty in all this ? We cannot tell. Too many thousands of years, too many thousands of ideas, divide us from these grandiose monuments. They are too big for us ; they are over our heads. We marvel at the waste of force and energy ; they

## ANCIENT EGYPT

seem without any cause or reason to be sprawling their vastness in the void ; as we note the Titanic execution of ideas that seem so childish we ask ourselves are we really on this earth or on a planet inhabited by beings who bear no resemblance to man ? Our first impression is that these colossal structures are malignant, hostile ; we gaze at them resignedly, not attempting to understand. Then, little by little, as the blood leaves our brain and our eyes see more clearly, the crushing weight on us grows less, and we begin to discover something human in this overwhelming mass. We distinguish ; we separate ; and before long we note the rudiments of what were later to develop into the laws of the architecture we hold to be the most beautiful of all. There can be no doubt that the Greek temple—the Parthenon, Segestum, Girgenti—exists, in its entirety, in Karnak. No great effort of imagination is needed

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

to produce it, complete, from its Egyptian matrix. It exists too, and in a less rudimentary state, in the temple of the Queen Hotshopsitou, of the XVIIIth Dynasty, at Deir-el-Bahri in the Valley of the Kings. There you find the unfinished porch with its entablature, its columns and its capitals ; if we came across it at Mycenæ we should not be surprised, and the Atrides would have felt at home there, and have offered their sacrifices to Zeus. And yet it is one of the most ancient temples in Egypt, and dates back to 1500 B.C. The Greeks would have added a pediment and lengthened the columns a little ; the building might then have been set up at Girgenti or Pæstum without offence to the most delicate eye.

This temple of Deir-el-Bahri, however, is somewhat exceptional, giving as it does the idea of what were to be the definitive forms of Greek art. Karnak, although parts of it, and

## ANCIENT EGYPT

especially the famous painted hall, belonging to a later date, still seems scarcely to have emerged from the murky, monstrous confusion of prehistoric times. To explain the enigma of these preposterous edifices, these huge flagstones planted on the top of the massive columns that are huddled together like trees in a pinewood, it was suggested that the Egyptians were unacquainted with the vaulted arch, and that all the eccentricities of their architecture flowed from this ignorance. This may have been true in primitive times, but from the XVIIIth Dynasty onwards, among the colossal structures which it spread over Egypt we find at Deir-el-Bahri long vaulted galleries; and behind the Ramasseum, the great funerary temple built by Rameses II and dedicated to Amon, there may still be seen what are known as "The Granaries of Joseph," vast storehouses with vaulted roofs, of which the bricks are stamped

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

with the seal of the Pharaoh who built the pillared hall at Karnak, the hall which is the archetype of the Egyptian architecture that cared only for the straight line.

No, they knew about the vaulted arch ; but, as was the case with the Greeks, they did not like it, rather despised it in fact, and only used it for unimportant constructions, such as outbuildings of palaces or temples. It will probably not have fitted in with their artistic ideal, which was above all a religious ideal. The vaulted arch was not heavy enough, not massive enough, not big enough. It did not sufficiently convey the impression of power : solid, massive, gloomy, tyrannical, terrible. Their gods required a habitation that should inspire terror, that should be prodigious, superhuman and inhuman ; for it is the temple that makes and moulds the god, who had perforce to be terrifying because such was the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

desire of the priests who ruled over the kings.

No photograph, no picture, no description, can convey any real idea of these monuments. They must be seen on the spot, in the heart of the country where they were born, beneath the unchanging sky that bends over them now as it did four or five thousand years ago, on the banks of the unique river that is as it was then, with the centuries round them whose touch they scarcely seem to have felt. And thus it is also with their art. In the long galleries of the museums, in the most perfect collection of reproductions, it often seems dull and difficult to understand, feeble, childish, tiresome. But here, by the waters of the Nile or among the sands and rocks of the desert, on the very walls that it covered, not with its dreams, for Egyptian art never dreams, but with its documents that go back to the dawn of history—here you will find it

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

reveal its true significance. And first of all we observe that the Egyptian artist will at times be charged with a kind of official mission to register for all eternity the victories, conquests and religious acts of a great reign ; and at others, more humbly, he will be merely the scribe or portrayer of a number of familiar incidents, realistically treated, which he records on the walls of the house of the dead. And he reproduces, in simplified lines but with all possible fidelity, the furniture, utensils, occupations of every-day life, so that these may come into being again and play their old part in the existence the other side of the tomb, immediately, without interruption, as though death made no difference. His mission is above all a practical one. No imaginative effort is required from him. What he has to do is to copy, in barest outline, for composition of groups is beyond him, the battles, the triumphs, the religious

## ANCIENT EGYPT

ceremonies he may have seen, and the harvesters, the cooks, the carpenters, the fishermen, the animals and the trees that he looked at every day. He may add a beauty and style of his own ; but these have not been required or expected, and will certainly not be paid for.

This beauty and style are most undoubtedly there ; but, as is the case with the monuments, they are not to be detected at once ; a certain intimacy with them is needed, an initiation. So it is also with Japanese, and, above all, Chinese, art. Here in Egypt we soon grow accustomed to these thousands of faces seen only in profile, while there is a front or three-quarter view of the body, giving an impression of a race afflicted with incurable stiff neck. And even more quickly do we get to know, and to like, the flat, simple tones, the colours that at first seemed so startling and violent : brick reds, crude greens,

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

staring yellows and silvery whites, that remind us rather of the pictures to be found in children's hymn-books. But before very long we learn to appreciate the reality, the truthfulness, the dignity, and, above all, the spirituality of these little figures, that on one and the same plane are going about their business or moving in religious procession, and seem, in some magical and incantatory fashion, to multiply the forms of life. There are certain bas-reliefs in the huge temples showing scenes of battle—troops marching to attack, kings drawing their bow or launching their chariot, manacling or trampling on their enemies—that may almost be regarded as sheer masterpieces, and ranked among the most unfaltering and glorious achievements of the grand style of decorative art.

As for the gigantic statues of their gods and kings, while some of these seem mere hopeless monstrosities, and

## ANCIENT EGYPT

others are purely conventional and erected as it were by the dozen without any kind of conviction, there still are some that possess an authority, dignity, majesty, a supreme serenity, that the art of sculpture has hardly ever again attained.

But it is the tiny masterpieces of their realistic sculpture that attract us most to-day. In the museum at Cairo there are statues in wood, diorite, schist, granite, limestone, sandstone, alabaster and copper that belong to the ancient empire and date back to about three thousand years before Christ. They represent scribes, bakers, kings and queens, women grinding corn, cooks, brewers, hunters, naked children. One has only to look at them to realise that the art of reproducing the human body, human life and movement, the play of muscles, the face with a soul behind it, has rarely exceeded the level of what we find here; and that certain of

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

these figures reveal a piety and tenderness, a power to breathe thought and feeling into matter and mould them into shape, that we shall rarely find equalled in the greatest artistic epoch of any country and of any time.

Side by side with these exquisite little masterpieces, mixed up among them, are quantities of objects that are disconcerting in the extreme; that are hideous, stupid, childish and bewildering. Let us suppose that you go to the first floor of the museum, to the long gallery reserved for the treasures recently disinterred from the tomb of Tutankhamen. Apparently this is the first time that the actual articles a dead man used during his lifetime have been found in an Egyptian tomb: the couch on which he lay, the throne he sat on, the garments, the jewels, the ornaments he wore, the things he had handled.

## ANCIENT EGYPT

As a rule only "doubles" were put in the tombs, in other words more or less faithful reproductions or facsimiles of these objects. But here, Tutankhamen being very young when he died, and his death having probably occurred suddenly, there will have been no time to make the "doubles." Further, Tutankhamen was the special favourite of the priests of Amon, whose worship he had restored; Amenophis IV, his father, in his revolt against sacerdotal arrogance, having substituted the cult of Aton. The priests were unwilling that the "double" of their well-beloved king should have to wait, while facsimiles were being made, for all the household affairs that would be needed in his new life; they consequently huddled together, without any delay, whatever had been in his palace at the moment of his death, and, with amazing prodigality, piled it all in the different chambers of his tomb. Up to the

## EGYPT AND EGYPTIAN ART

present only about a third of these treasures have been catalogued and placed on exhibition, so that it is possible that many a surprise may still be in store for us.

The actual exhibits in the showcases of the museum give us a fair idea of the daily life, the surroundings, of a Pharaoh of the XVIIIth Dynasty, the dynasty that preceded the Christian era by fifteen to thirteen centuries. It was, following after the Pyramids, one of the great periods of Egyptian power and Egyptian art. Among other marvels, we find the torso of a young girl, which ranks with the most adorable pieces of Greek sculpture; we find wonderful bas-reliefs, and the bust of Amenophis IV, Tutankhamen's father, which is an exquisite example of an art that had reached its zenith. And then, side by side with these, there is the furniture of poor Tutankhamen, surely the most extraordinary medley of

## ANCIENT EGYPT

crazy bric-à-brac that ever figured in an auctioneer's nightmare : gold-encrusted couches with ivory and mother-of-pearl inlay posed on jackals or oxen that are flattened out like earthworms and totter on misshapen, spidery legs ; chests that look like milliners' bandboxes ; chariots of war that might serve as creaky perambulators ; thrones on which no one would ever dare to sit ; and, above and beyond all, alabaster vases that are so monstrously and absurdly overladen with ornament as to baffle all description, covered with sickly eruptions and knobs and bumps that shine and shine again—the whole affair such a muddle and of such lunatic bad taste that the most ridiculous pieces of crockery offered as prizes at the humblest country fair would seem, by comparison, models of simplicity and classical restraint.

### III

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

WHAT does it tell us, this life of Old Egypt, the most ancient that it is possible to reconstruct with any approach to certainty—what does it tell us, as we gaze at it here in the very spot where it had its being five or six thousand years ago, under the *same unchanging indigo sky* with the sun shining on a land of abundance, generous and fertile beyond compare ; and on the banks of a river that would seem, unlike any other river in the world, to be truly the friend of man ? Externally, materially, in all that concerns the climate, the produce of the soil, and the scenery, things to-day are more or less the same. The

## ANCIENT EGYPT

ploughs, the boats, the animals, the methods of irrigation, the people at work in the fields, look for all the world like the figures that cover the walls of the tombs of the ancient empire. The only difference is that Egypt is comparatively treeless to-day, whereas then it will probably have been more wooded. As for the life on the river, which is the most important of all, for the Nile is the soul of Egypt, the same dahabeeyahs with long swallow's wing sails still crawl along the dull yellow waters, that in the winter months nothing disturbs save only Cook and Son's steamers.

At the first glance, therefore, one would think that all was the same, that the thousands of years have not interrupted the reign of the countless Pharaohs who succeeded one another on this earth. But the atmosphere is different. The shell has remained intact, but there is nothing inside. Compared with what it used to be, the

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

country exists only on the surface. Its real life is gone, the life that was three parts of itself, (the life that we find so difficult to understand, for it was the life of death. And indeed ancient Egypt was, above all else, a tomb. The idea of death absorbed, overwhelmed her ; nor was it an idea that, as with the Christians, offered hopes of eternal felicity to the true believer, but a death behind which lurked grim shapes, grim ordeals, a death that held out poor comfort, and was at its best a pale replica of life, prolonged as far as could be underneath the ground and then finally absorbed into nothingness. The only matters of serious interest were mummies, sarcophagi, and the passing away of one's friends. Funerary industries crowded the towns and the banks of the river. Everyone, down to the poorest fellah, had himself embalmed. The country was overrun with corpses. The

## ANCIENT EGYPT

essential thing was not to be happy in this world, but to have the assured possession of an inviolable tomb that should be very comfortably furnished. The cities of the living were as nothing compared with those of the dead. No trace of them remains. Even the palaces of the kings have disappeared ; and as for the houses both of rich and poor, these were either constructions of lath and plaster or shanties hastily run up with wood and reeds, in which the people camped while they waited for the symbolic barque that was to waft them to the other shore. But, across the river, in the "Land of the Meeting of Men," arose "The Good Dwelling," the eternal city, stately and steadfast, built of granite into which thirty or forty centuries have bitten in vain. Whatever served life has returned to the ooze of the river, to the sand of the desert ; all things connected with death have remained, and abide ; for the whole soil of

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Egypt is riddled, like a sponge, with innumerable tombs, while the surface is covered with pyramids and temples that are, in fact, no more than the tombs of gods and kings.

Did this shadow of death weigh on the people as much as it would on us? That is scarcely probable. The peasant or fellah in the days of the Pharaohs, as in our own time, had no leisure to meditate on life beyond the grave; he toiled from the rise of the sun to its setting for a wage that barely sufficed to keep off starvation. And yet, in the folk-lore of the XIIIth Dynasty, there is a story, *The Fellah's Complaint*, translated by Maspero, which shows him no poorer or unhappier than he is to-day. He leaves his village to seek his fortune, with a convoy of asses laden with salt and reeds, wolf-skins and jackal-hides, seeds of all kinds, grapes, pigeons, partridges, quail—in fact, quite a respectable cargo of produce from the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

Plain of Salt—and one that certainly conveys no suggestion of penury. On the road he is robbed, through some shabby trick contrived by the slave of a Palace Intendant. Nine times in succession does he return, bubbling over with bold and incoherent and incessant talk, to demand justice of the Intendant, who, poor man, means well, but cannot discriminate between the conflicting statements of defendant and plaintiff. But at the end, through the personal intervention of the Pharaoh, the peasant obtains restitution of all that has been taken from him. Now, to the enemy from without, the Pharaohs were pitiless. They put in chains, they mutilated, they exterminated, regarding this as their most obvious and undoubted duty; but in regard to their subjects there never was, perhaps, in all this world a long line of monarchs so just, so humane, so paternal. With the exception of an occasional bastinado

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

inflicted on a recalcitrant debtor, you will never find, in the hosts of paintings and drawings, an Egyptian being ill-treated, tortured, or put to death. In the midst of a barbarous world, manners were so gentle on the banks of the Nile that when it came to inventing some terrible punishment for the damned, nothing more cruel could be found than suspending the criminal face downwards in the shades, casting him among swine, or having him devoured by hippopotami or crocodiles. It was only much later, at the beginning of our era, that the Asiatics taught them to invent a Gate of Hell, that pivoted on the right eye of the wicked rich, to his extreme discomfort.

But the inhabitants of the great cities—the functionaries, officials, scribes, merchants—all those, in short whom we would include to-day in the aristocracy and middle class—what sort of a life was theirs? It cannot have been attractive to be confronted

## ANCIENT EGYPT

by corpses at every turn ; to be surrounded by gods that were nearly all monstrous, nearly all malignant ; to have, as the sole object of one's existence, a tomb underneath the ground, in which that existence, now become shadowy, pale, motionless, should be indefinitely prolonged, though divested of all the charm, the liberty, the happiness of life on earth, and with the additional disadvantage that it might possibly be eternal. On the other hand we, who have not even the assurance of that faint survival, who have nothing we can build on, no prospect whatever—we do not allow this unduly to disturb us. It is quite possible, therefore, that, in spite of their lugubrious environment, the Egyptians of the olden days made the best of things, just as we do. In any event, the mural paintings show us that their life was not for ever troubled with thoughts of death. We have constant representations of what we

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

still regard as the joys of man. People are hunting, fishing, playing games ; gathering grapes for the vintage, drinking their cool wine on the banks of the river, among the reeds or beneath the shade of leafy arbours ; they are busy in the kitchen, they give parties, they fatten their geese as though already familiar with *foie gras*, they dance to the strains of music. And the innumerable paintings that describe all this with such scrupulous fidelity, were carefully wrapped round the mummy so that the moment the "double" awakened, they all came into being and comforted him, like so many cinema pictures incessantly following each other on the screen of eternity.

Here we note a certain inconsistency, and of this we shall find many instances, notably in their theology. Egypt is, in this particular, a very curious country. At first we seem to be confronted by mighty

## ANCIENT EGYPT

certitudes, which, with the thousands of years behind them, lie stamped on the everlasting granite. But, as we look closer, we find that these certitudes are apt to contradict themselves, and that the granite reflects only shadows. Buried beneath the whole religious and moral edifice, beneath all that concerns the gods and the life to come, lies hidden an entirely opposite belief, the great agnostic pantheism of those who knew, or believed they knew, the truth. Side by side, and contemporary, with the texts that deal with the pallid existence in the Beyond, where men shall be as gods—texts which minutely relate the details of this existence, to which life on earth must be sacrificed so that it may continue there—are other texts that display the most serious doubt as to the joys that await man beyond the tomb. In these records we find the *Carpe Diem* of every tottering faith. "Lull thy heart to peace in

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

oblivion ; so long as thou livest follow the call of thy heart and be happy," is written there. " Never weary of following thy heart's desire, and vex not thy heart while thou sojournest on earth. It is not given to man to carry his possessions with him ; none that have gone have ever returned. Tears cannot refresh the heart of him who lies in the grave. Therefore do thou make holiday and have no care."

These words, translated by M. Maspero, date back to King Antef, about three thousand years before our era ; and connect, through space and the centuries, with the secret pessimism of all great religions.

It is certain that no such qualms troubled the faith of the people. At any rate we find no suggestion of them in the tombs, where the records treat only of the popular religion which brought happiness or unhappiness to man ; for the esoteric faith in " Osirification," or the return of the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

soul to the god-head and its absorption in the infinite divine, was far above the heads of the people and of all such as had not been specially initiated. With the exception of a few high dignitaries, a few elect among the priestly caste who realised, perhaps, that to become a god was to return to the divine nothingness, the whole people, from the richest to the poorest, from the masters to the slaves, from the most cultured to the most ignorant—nay, even the kings, who, for all that has been said to the contrary, have been shown in many ways not always to have been in the secret—all were obsessed by the idea of the frail, precarious, hesitating survival of their “double”; and if they had any desire to be happy on this earth it was, in the main, that they might provide a starting-point, a model, material, for their happiness under the earth, their happiness beyond the tomb.

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Whatever height the speculations of the initiated priests may have attained, it is certain that they made no effort to communicate it to the crowd, to spread it among the people. In the matter of the "double," they gave solemn sanction, even in the royal tombs, to the grossest and most childish beliefs. The more distinguished the dead man, the more ridiculous would be the arrangements for his posthumous existence. Some measure of idealism obtained in the ordinary tombs. There it was held sufficient to represent by symbols and images the objects that the shade would need. But in the tombs of the kings the priests buried the exact facsimiles of these objects, sometimes the objects themselves; sometimes legs of mutton and chickens, vegetables and fruit; and sometimes mummified servants.

## IV

### THE WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

WE cannot yet tell with any certainty what were the secret thoughts of the Egyptian priests ; we are not even sure that they had any beyond those which are found in the cryptic pages of the *Book of the Dead*. Much has been said in regard to their occult science that the most recent Egyptologists have by no means confirmed. It is of course true that the Great Pyramid of Cheops presents us with extraordinary enigmas, unlike those contained in any other monument in the world. For details I will refer the reader to the fine book of Abbé Th. Moreux, *La Science Mystérieuse des Pharaons* ;

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

let it suffice here if I mention that the meridian, the north-south line that passes over the apex of the Great Pyramid, is still, after the discovery of Australia and America, the actual meridian of to-day. Further, if we multiply by one million the height of the pyramid, we obtain the distance from the earth to the sun ; the length of the polar ray is given, as well as that of the sidereal year, and the distance covered by the earth on its orbit in a twenty-four hours day ; the number of years of the precession of the equinoxes, a phenomenon only discovered by Hipparchus in 180 B.C., the density of the earth, and many other marvels that it would take too long to tell.

These things can scarcely be coincidences, for all that the method of arriving at the measurements, multiplying now by one million and now by ten, may appear a little arbitrary. But it is not impossible that the Great

## ANCIENT EGYPT

Pyramid, which dates back to the beginning of the IVth Dynasty, about 3000 B.C., and is one of the most ancient monuments in Egypt, in fact almost prehistoric, may be the tomb of some former civilisation. In any event, the later monuments have, at least up to the present, revealed nothing remarkable. Indeed, we find that the mechanics and geometry of the ancient Egyptians were of the most elementary order, and that in mathematics they had not even contrived a figure for each of the nine units of the decimal. It has long been regarded as a marvellous achievement that they should have been able to transport their enormous obelisks from the quarries of Assouan to Thebes, 250 miles away, and to Memphis and Gizeh, a distance of 500 miles; hugh blocks which they would turn into statues or hoist on to the top of their pylons and pyramids. But their mural paintings, which re-

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

cord all the events of everyday life, show that this colossal transport was effected quite simply by means of boats; and that the hands of men set the great blocks in their places—man-power, as we say to-day, being practically inexhaustible, there could never have been any difficulty in providing the requisite quantity. When a stone of some fifty tons weight had to be lifted on to a pylon there would be erected by the side of this pylon, as we find to-day at Karnak, a mountain of earth and bricks, forming an inclined plane, along which thousands of slaves towed and dragged the gigantic monolith.

It has also been regarded as curious that the paintings in their tombs, sometimes most delicate miniatures, should appear as fresh, with every detail minutely recorded, as though they had been done by daylight, and without a trace on the wall of smoke from a torch or lamp; and this

## ANCIENT EGYPT

although the tomb, dug into some mountain-side, must almost always have been plunged in impenetrable darkness. It was imagined, therefore, that the Egyptians must have had some kind of cold light, the secret of which is lost to us, or perhaps even electricity ; or that, by some play of mirrors, a ray of the sun was thrown from reflector to reflector on the wall that had to be painted. But there has been a recent discovery of a quantity of lamps which, it seems, undoubtedly burned alcohol ; and it is presumed that the spirit which gave a smokeless light was the alcohol obtained from dates.

Again, when they hewed the great blocks from the quarries and shaped them to their purposes, even the Assouan granite, which is so impenetrably hard that our steel chisels break on it, they are shown to have had recourse to a very simple device that is still in use to-day. They

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

would dig holes in the stone and introduce wedges of sycamore on which they poured water; and the wood, dilating, split the granite as easily as the frost will burst a glass vessel or leaden pipe.

It would seem, therefore, as though there had been some tendency to magnify the mysterious science of the Egyptians. In mechanics, astronomy (excepting always the Great Pyramid), in industrial and mathematical equipment, they were probably behind our ancestors of a thousand years ago. But as they had at their disposal whole armies of slaves, slaves of war and slaves of their own, over whom they exercised an absolute despotism, they were able, like the ants, to carry out vast enterprises that we, with our wonderful machinery, would not venture to undertake. So, for instance, the Queen Hotshopsitou boasts of having, within a space of seven months, torn from the quarries near

## ANCIENT EGYPY

Assouan and conveyed to Thebes, carved, polished and set up in their places, the two great rose-coloured obelisks of granite of which one is in Paris while the other still guards the entrance to the sanctuary at Karnak.

In all this we can find no trace of occult science. And yet Egypt has always been considered the cradle, the birthplace, the favourite abode of occultism. The whole world of antiquity regarded it as the country of the gods, the home of wisdom and mystery. The great sages of Greece—Solon, Pythagoras, Plato and many others—undertook the long and perilous voyage in the hope that the priests of the valley of the Nile would, of their knowledge, grant them the replies to supreme enigmas. But apparently, save for some hoary legend like that of Atlantis, there was no revelation, nor did they learn much of value. It is, of course, true

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

that silence was imposed on the initiates; and the uninitiated were told nothing.

So far as we can tell at present, therefore, the mystery of Egypt does not seem to have been very remarkable. And yet our first feeling, as we set foot on this enchanted land, our first desire, and one that remains with us always, is to fathom the secret of that prodigious, teeming life of old that still haunts these tombs and temples. We cannot credit that so ancient a faith, with the myriad inscriptions and images that date back five or six thousand years, should not hide something that is very great, something that we have never divined. The men who fashioned them belonged to the very origin of the race. For more than fifty centuries they lived and multiplied and prospered, in an almost unbroken peace, on this one spot of the globe; and this is a thing that has never happened to

## ANCIENT EGYPT

any people. Beyond all others, therefore, they must have had time to study the problems of life; they must have had an opportunity, a leisure, such as have probably never existed before and will never exist again. Yet the further we advance the less mystery remains. We discover, to our surprise, that these strange images, these perplexing, bewildering signs, which must, we feel certain, have their own profound hidden meaning, their own stirring suggestion, do in fact narrate only the simplest, the most elementary, the most commonplace things, that sometimes even are ridiculous and almost childish. Where religious doctrine is concerned these revelations are curiously incoherent and primitive. And behind all this existed a civilisation whose art was of the very highest, whose monuments are unequalled in grandeur; a civilisation that endured, amidst unexampled prosperity, for an

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

almost fabulous period. The truth seems to be that we are inclined to exaggerate its moral and intellectual acquirements, as also its culture ; that this civilisation was, above all, an agricultural one, a civilisation of great landed proprietors and of rich, pious and superstitious peasants—unless it be that we have so far only grasped the superficial meaning of paintings and hieroglyphs ; and this is by no means impossible.

As we glance through their books, notably the famous *Book of the Dead*, whose cryptic title leads us to hope for a key to the Beyond, we are conscious of the same disillusion as when we visit their tombs and their temples. Yet to them it was the book of books, the one that surely contained whatever might be known of the future. Fragments of the sacred text cover the walls of all the tombs, the sides of all the sarcophagi, and even the cloths in which the mummies are

## ANCIENT EGYPT

swathed. The book was the talisman, the guardian, the protector, the supreme hope of the dead. But to us it is a disappointment. There is one chapter, devoted to the Judgment of the Dead, in which, probably for the first time in this world, the lofty idea of the drama of human consciousness and the survival of the soul is flung, like a ray of light, into the darkness of those almost prehistoric days ; but, apart from this, the book is so full of commonplaces that we ask ourselves, even more anxiously than in the case of the mural hieroglyphs, whether it be possible that we have really grasped the entire meaning. " It is not that the grammar presents any difficulties," writes one of our most distinguished Egyptologists, " for this is, as a rule, very simple ; the meaning of the words is known to us, and yet it frequently happens that a sentence, which we can translate without the slightest difficulty, con-

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

veys some odd, childish, and even silly idea. And yet we may be perfectly certain that it did not seem so to the ancient Egyptians. These curious expressions that make us smile may possibly conceal deep-lying truths, thoughts that are profound in their simplicity. These may have eluded us, for the reason that we are not yet sufficiently familiar with the Egyptian method of handling abstract ideas. The metaphor was evidently much favoured by them ; and till we discover the key to these metaphors we are forced to accept the literal meaning only, whereby we may be led into error ; for perhaps the true meaning escapes us because we are unable to understand the figurative sense of expressions borrowed from the world of real, concrete things. Thus it follows that the translation of the *Book of the Dead*, like that of the *Book of the Pyramids*, must not yet be regarded as in all ways final,

## ANCIENT EGYPT

though we may have gathered its general meaning."<sup>1</sup>

A similar remark is made in reference to the Sanscrit text by great translators such as Grasmann, Roth and Bergaigne. We are not yet entitled to pass final judgment on the sacred books of the two oldest religions of the world, for we are not yet certain that we fully understand them.

It was, of course, the celebrated Rosetta stone, discovered in 1799, with its triple text in Hieratic, Demotic, and Greek, that gave Champollion and his successors the key to all hieroglyphic inscriptions. But we must bear in mind that this stone dates from the Ptolemics; from a time, therefore, when the Egypt of the Pharaohs, which was the real Egypt, had long ceased to be. Indeed, it is for this reason that I intend to say nothing here of the temples of Den-

<sup>1</sup> A. Naville, *La Religion des Anciens Egyptiens.*

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

derah and of Philæ, which, beautiful and wonderfully preserved as they are, still belong to a posthumous Egypt—an Egypt without a soul, an artificial and theatrical Egypt, that has nothing to tell us and merely repeats over and over again what she has ceased to understand. As far back as the XXVth dynasty, about five centuries before our era, the Persian conquest had dealt the power of the priesthood—and the priests were the custodians of the national consciousness—a blow from which they never recovered. Three hundred and fifty years later, during the second invasion, under the reign of Nektanebos, the temples were sacked ; and the priests, who had ever since the XXIst dynasty really governed the country and become the depositaries of all its traditions, were either banished or massacred. Now it was the priests alone who knew the secret meaning of the hieroglyphic script ; and the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

usurping priests of the time of the Ptolemies, who may very possibly not have been initiated, will have dealt with the symbols without realising their inner or hidden significance, which they were unable to convey, being ignorant of it themselves. It may therefore very well be that this famous key of the Rosetta stone only unlocks a very small door which merely gives the clue to material matters ; and that Champollion and his successors have translated thousands of texts without ever once divining the real thought of the ancient priests.

The *Book of the Dead*, at least as far as we can understand it, is above all, a ritual of magic, a collection of magical formulas. It tells the dead what words must be used to keep the monsters at bay that wait on the other side ; or to cause to fly open the gates that admit to the thrice-happy life in the gardens of Ialou. And, so

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

that he shall not forget them, these sacred words are painted inside his coffin. All that we know of Egyptian religion is thus hedged round with magic. They were convinced that certain formulas, certain attitudes, certain acts, pacified or dominated the gods ; bound, loosed or controlled the unknown forces of this world and the next. In its essence the Government was no more than a sacerdotal oligarchy, founded on magic ; we find the Book of Exodus speaking of "the magicians with their enchantments," the rod transformed into a serpent, the waters of the Nile and of the whole of Egypt, even in the household vessels, turned into blood, the country covered with frogs, etc., etc. And in a tale of Ancient Egypt that Maspero has translated, entitled *The Veracious History of Satni-Khamois*, we find an Ethiopian sorcerer wielding his spells, in accordance with the best traditions of the Black Art, and having an

## ANCIENT EGYPT

Egyptian sorcerer as his opponent. The Ethiopian causes a flame to spring forth in the Palace courtyard, under the eyes of the Pharaoh ; whereupon the Egyptian summons a thunder-shower from the sky, and the flame is at once put out. Then the Ethiopian wraps the hall in a cloud so dense that none can distinguish the face of his friend or his neighbour. The Egyptian "speaks the word of power" to the sky, and the cloud disappears. Finally, the Ethiopian causes an enormous stone vault, two hundred cubits long and fifty wide, to form over the heads of the Pharaoh and his princes. The Pharaoh utters a cry of alarm, as do his people. But the Egyptian wizard bids them have no fear, and promptly hurls a papyrus boat so vast that it catches up the arch and sails off with it to the "immense waters of Egypt," in other words, Lake Maeris. Whereupon the Ethiopian admits defeat, and promises

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

not to return to Egypt for fifteen hundred years.

There are not lacking proofs that the Egyptian priests and magicians employed the crudest methods to trade on popular credulity. At Karnak, for instance, in the obscure chapel that contains the statue of Sekhmet, the goddess with the face of a cat (or it may be the statue of Mout or Bastet, so interchangeable are these divinities), the lighting is from the roof only, and it is made to fall so cunningly on the figure that the face seems almost to be alive, to move ; even we sceptical Europeans have difficulty in assuring ourselves that it is all illusion. Indeed, in most of their statues, which had movable arms and legs and were made to speak, the trickery was of the most childish kind. Thus, for instance, when it was considered necessary that the god Chous Neferto-hep, the third divinity of the Theban triad, should show signs of animation,

## ANCIENT EGYPT

he was carried to a place in the temple that was provided with a specially prepared silver ceiling. But, indeed, very little was needed to delude the good people. In the great ceremonies and processions it was enough for a priest to assume the mask of a god for all to be convinced that they beheld the god in person. And in all the temples underground passages have been found, known only to the initiates, who made use of them when it was necessary to remove the offerings that the gods were supposed to have consumed.

Where did the real science end and deception begin ? Who were they that knew of the cheat and they that did not know ? We should find this question difficult to answer in the case of our own religion. How reply to it, then, of a cult that has been dead three thousand years ? Did the priests, realising how impossible it was to raise the masses to their own lofty

## WISDOM OF THE PRIESTS

monotheistic conception, allow popular credulity and superstition to follow their natural course and sink by degrees to the lowest depths of a muddled fetishism and polytheism that were childishly, senilely inane ? A similar phenomenon is to be noted in other religions, especially those of India and Persia ; and, indeed, nearly all of them in their endeavour to make themselves understood by the common herd become the more degenerate, degraded, and confused as they wander further from their source.

It is certain that the priests wielded considerable power, but it is no less certain that they did not, as has at times been supposed, possess any supernatural means of maintaining their influence. It would happen at times that they found themselves in conflict with the kings ; like ordinary mortals, they had to yield to brute force. Thus, as I have already mentioned, Amenophis IV, the father

## ANCIENT EGYPT

of Tutankhamen, being anxious to rid himself of the priests of Thebes, whose power rivalled and menaced his own, confiscated their wealth and summarily suppressed their god Amon, setting up Aton, the sun-god of Heliopolis, in his place. Under Tutankhamen there was a new revolution, Aton was de-throned and Amon restored ; and all these dramas in which gods contend with each other, dramas that we can only conceive as being played by supreme initiates on the mountain-tops of magic, actually go the way of the vulgar political intrigue in which he is the winner who has an armed force behind him.

# V

## THE SECRET RELIGION

IN the midst of the incoherence and inconsistency that pervade Egyptian theology we come across traces at times of a secret religion, traces that the parasitic growths of the popular religion have not been able entirely to hide. We find, then, that these innumerable gods with the ever-changing names are in truth only one god, who was at the same time all the others ; one god, whose name and form varied with locality or temple, with his powers and functions, with dynasties and kings. The Pharaoh is a god during his lifetime ; all men are gods after their death and whichever god they choose to be. God

## ANCIENT EGYPT

is all and all is god, consequently there is only one god and he cannot be explained because he is all. Thus we arrive at a pantheism so far-reaching that it becomes monotheistic, and then of necessity turns into absolute agnosticism because we cannot know the Great All.

This secret religion formed the basis of the mysteries, which the Greeks copied, notably in their mysteries of Eleusis, the most famous of all. We learn from the thousands of paintings to be found in tomb and temple that it was the great drama of death and resurrection that these mysteries allegorically conveyed. Under the myth of the resurrected Osiris lay hidden the history of all mankind. Even as Osiris was recalled to life by magical incantations and formulas, so might the death of every man be made the beginning of a new existence, provided the same magical incantations and formulas were employed.

## THE SECRET RELIGION

To the profane, who interpreted this new birth literally, the life that was to start again was more or less the same as the one that had just ended ; to the initiate it meant a life of the spirit, an eternal and universal life in the Great All. And it is possible that initiation was practically no more than the study during one's lifetime, the rehearsal, as it were, of the great after-life drama of death and the new birth.

The essential aim of the mysteries, therefore, was to give expression to the nebulous promise of agnostic pantheism ; but they wrapped it in a multitude of metaphors, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, for the benefit of those who could not lift their eyes so high. The texts that expounded it and proclaimed that man was strictly and wholly god, and identical with all gods, were never, though precautions were taken, really kept secret. They were contained in the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

*Book of the Dead*, of which there were thousands of copies, handed down from father to son. But if these austere texts had been circulated among the people there would have been an end to religion ; and they were put aside, therefore, carefully kept in the background. The priests, urged by the desire to add to their number, multiplied indefinitely the names of this secretly unique and unfathomable god, multiplied his attributes and his images. Magical incantations took the place of the doctrine it was so difficult to understand, so dangerous to dwell upon. The priests framed and sanctified formulas that were supposed to render those who made use of them, and knew not, as happy and vigorous in the other world as those who knew, that is, the initiates. There may possibly have been two kinds of initiation ; the one, and the higher, to pantheism and agnosticism ; the other, more practical and frequent, to the

## THE SECRET RELIGION

magical formulas ; and, indeed, we find again and again the religion which prayed to and worshipped the gods inextricably confused with the magic and witchcraft that brought those gods to their knees and compelled them to obey man's bidding. Here once more we note the inconsistency of the Egyptian mind, which at one moment attains the loftiest height of the greatest religions to fall back immediately after into an abyss of barbaric stupidity, of imaginings that were incredibly inane. Thus we have the curious spectacle of a king who has proclaimed himself the equal of the gods of Abydos and Heliopolis, monarch of earth and heaven, lord of yesterday and to-morrow and descendant of Ra, stooping to the pettiest, most contemptible subterfuges, passwords and falsehoods, that he may ward off the crocodiles and hippopotami, tortoises, snakes, baboons and red asses that bar the road

## ANCIENT EGYPT

which leads to the eternal fields of Ialou.

Is it possible that this grand agnostic pantheism, which is the loftiest peak that human thought has ever climbed, or that any religion has ever attained—is it possible that, as some have believed, it may merely be the lingering echo of an ancient tradition left behind by another race of men, a race that has disappeared but was more intelligent, more spiritual, than those that have survived ? If the foundation of all great religions is more or less the same ; if, having sacrificed a god that the world might be saved, they all end in absorption and annihilation in the divine, may we infer that the idea fell ready-made from heaven and that the different primitive religions did no more than accept it, mangling and corrupting it after their own individual fashion ? The suggestion is attractive but evidently somewhat fantastic. M. Alexandre Moret, one of the leading

## THE SECRET RELIGION

French Egyptologists, very justly remarks that at the fetishism stage, which is the origin of all religions in Egypt as elsewhere, "the mass of primitive men believe that their soul will be saved because it is bound up with the 'Totem'; in other words, an animal or vegetable species or a class of objects that cannot *all* perish. At the death of the individual the 'Totem,' the immortal, collective soul, gathers unto itself the atom which it had sent forth on this fleeting excursion."

Thus in the night of the centuries that have no history no sooner does man emerge from the animal stage than the thought of survival frets him, and he yearns to find a resting-place for his soul. May we not have here the humble origin of the belief in immortality, the origin of all the creeds that, starting with the wretched "Totem," grew and expanded, keeping pace with the intellect, till they attained the inscrutable, unfathomable

## ANCIENT EGYPT

gods of India, Persia, and Egypt, and even the supreme God of Israel, who is not the Jehovah of the Bible, but he of the secret traditions, the En-Sof of Zohar ? There is not one of these gods whom we might not worship to-day without the least sense of degradation, for our own reasoned, scientific agnosticism has discovered nothing else, at least nothing better, and the final truth was always, is still, and probably always will be, that after death we disappear in the entire "Totem," that we have never known anything, that we know nothing now, and that we never shall know. Notwithstanding all we have learned and that science has taught us, we know nothing more of our origin and our end, we are no farther advanced, than the prehistoric savage who worshipped, as the symbol of his god, of the immortality of his clan and his soul, a cat, a falcon, a crocodile, or merely a clump of reeds.

## THE SECRET RELIGION

Of this higher religion, that was never as systematic, as widespread, as philosophical, as those of India and Persia, the Egyptians retained only one essential dogma, the Judgment of the Dead. This was the basis of their system of morality, and nearly all their religious literature derived from it. The loftiest expressions of this dogma, notably the deification of the soul or the return of the soul to God—which connects with the Vedic Nirvana just as much as with agnostic pantheism—fell by slow degrees into neglect, or at least receded farther and farther into the background; and the Judgment dwindled into a mere appearance before a tribunal whose procedure very much resembled that of our courts of to-day. This matter has been dwelt on so often that I will merely mention a few leading features. Brought before Osiris and forty-two divinities, each one representing the sin he is called upon to punish, the dead

## ANCIENT EGYPT

man is amazed to see his heart in one of the scales which Horus holds in his hands, the other containing the image of Maat or Maït, representing absolute justice. He then pleads his own cause and makes his confession. This confession, like everything else that concerns Egyptian morality, is exclusively negative ; he enumerates all the sins he has not committed. In Egypt it was of more importance to have done no harm than to have done good. Should the nicely balancing scales testify to the sincerity of his confession, the dead man becomes the equal of Osiris, he is Osiris himself, and, being Osiris, he is all the gods. He is free to go where he pleases, take the form that he pleases ; he can choose his own destiny, either climbing into the vessel of the sun, when he becomes Ra, the supreme god, or betaking himself to the heavenly fields of Ialou. In a word, he is of the divine family ; "the gods surround

## THE SECRET RELIGION

him and are glad of him, for now he is one of them."

But, to judge by what we see on the walls of the tombs, it does not look as though the defunct took much interest in this deification, or that he had any special desire to board the vessel of Ra or to sojourn in the fields of Ialou. He is free to go where he pleases, on earth or in heaven, but rather than be let loose in an infinite that inspires him with no confidence he prefers to remain close to his mummy, in the comfortable, well-furnished, well-provisioned tomb where he can resume the occupations and enjoy all the pleasures of his terrestrial life. This, at least, would seem a legitimate inference, for the paintings treat all that concerns deification in the vaguest and sketchiest fashion, while the most elaborate care is lavished on the way the "double" installs himself and organises his existence—the "double" not being perhaps, properly speaking, the soul, that

## ANCIENT EGYPT

is, the divine soul, but from the practical point of view a much more interesting soul, the soul of everyday life, the human soul of an existence that is to be indefinitely prolonged.

These are obviously somewhat irreconcilable beliefs, or at the least ill-assorted ; and here in Egypt, as everywhere else, the lowest prevails in the end and swallows up the others. Even the Judgment of the Dead, that noble, solemn drama of conscience passing judgment on itself, was not allowed long to remain on its pinnacle ; very soon it became enough for the greatest criminal to recite certain formulas for him to be welcomed by Osiris and receive from him the divinity reserved for the innocent.

But if the dead man could not clear himself before the posthumous tribunal, if his heart, heavy with crime, inclined the scale downwards, and he was not provided with the magical formulas that control the

## THE SECRET RELIGION

gods, what happened then ? Le Page Renouf, the most learned of English Egyptologists, declares that in not one of the inscriptions hitherto deciphered is there record of punishment inflicted on the condemned. Here I think he is wrong. In that vast, black, desolate furnace, the terrible Valley of the Kings, I myself have seen, notably in the tomb of Sethos I, unmistakable figures of the damned, hanging head downwards in the shades, or their souls being driven into the bodies of swine which are tormented by monkeys, the pig apparently being the only animal that will never look up at the sky. It is impossible to get the better of him, my dragoman used to tell me, so long as he has his nose on the ground, in the muck. He will do nothing you want him to, and beating or threats are no use ; he struggles like the very devil, and yells loud enough to alarm the whole village. But jerk his snout up to the sky and

## ANCIENT EGYPT

he will suddenly stop, alarmed, disturbed, staring in amazement at the wonderful blue vault that he has never seen before ; his picrcing shrieks dry up in his throat, he becomes as gentle as a child, and you can do with him what you will.

## VI

### THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

SUCH is the spiritual atmosphere that pervades these innumerable underground tombs, that enfolds the whole country over which there reigned thirty dynasties of Pharaohs. It was the atmosphere breathed by those mighty kings who became gods in their lifetime, and so actually and concretely gods that they worshipped themselves and offered sacrifices to their own statue. And yet these splendid monarchs at times betrayed a very small mind. For instance, he who was the greatest, the most truly Egyptian of them all, the famous Rameses II, called Sesostris by the Greeks, and believed to have been the

## ANCIENT EGYPT

Pharaoh of the Bible. His mummy is in a showcase at the Cairo Museum. He is now, as he lies there in his glass box with a saucer on either side of him containing disinfectants, only a black, shrivelled, horrible little old man half eaten away by ants ; not very long ago the tropical heat of an Egyptian summer so worked upon him, or liquefied him perhaps, that he raised his right arm aloft, to the unspeakable terror of the attendants in the gallery. He reigned for sixty-seven years. It is to him that we owe the vast buildings at Luxor, at Karnak, the tombs of Rameses, the temples of Abou-Simbel and of Abydos, the colossal statues of Memphis—in fact, half the monuments and temples of Egypt from the Delta down to the Second Cataract. But so monstrous and morbid and childish a vanity possessed him that he appeared to resent the existence of any king before himself. He was jealous of all that had been done by other kings.

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

His life was poisoned by the records of their glory. Wherever it was possible he caused their royal seal that was stamped on the granite to be erased and his own set in its place. He would have liked to wipe out the whole history of Egypt till it came to him. And this destruction of seals, with the accompanying violation of tombs, was frequent among the kings. The successors of the famous Queen Hotshopsitou, for instance, took incredible pains to blot out for ever the record of her reign. They obviously were not intelligent or far-seeing enough to realise that their bad example would inevitably be followed, and that, notwithstanding all their incantations, they would in their turn be treated in exactly the same way as they had treated their predecessors.

The moral and intellectual atmosphere, even of the throne, was not very remarkable. It falls far short of the level reached in India or Persia.

## ANCIENT EGYPT

It hovers over the ground, it cannot rise above commonplace, everyday things. It strikes one as a little heavy, a little musty, like the climate, like the Egyptian way of living. For the Egyptian of old seems to have been more alert, more active, industrious—in fact a better kind of citizen than the Oriental of to-day. Baked by the sun, he still kept his full vigour; there was more of the European about him than of the African or the Asiatic. Incredibly extravagant in his palaces, his tombs and his temples, he was inclined to be economical in private life, conventional, a lover of order and method, a little humdrum. Moreover, he was much less austere than we are led to believe by the thousands of paintings that depict him as everlastinglly surrounded by spirits and gods, or performing his solemn ritual in religious and funereal ceremonies. He takes no pains to conceal his pleasures, which he does not regard as

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

vices. He loves women, wine, and particularly beer, the national beverage, which, like the bread, is prepared afresh every day. He is seen drinking it in pleasant kiosks or under the shade of the vine, as he plays his game of draughts or listens to music on the bank of the little pond that ornamented every garden, with pretty girls round him clad in tissues "light as woven air." Regarding it as his duty to follow the example set by his gods, he marries one of his sisters; and as these incestuous marriages went on for thousands of years our prejudice against consanguineous unions may perhaps rest on no scientific basis.

It is at least certain that, in regard to sexual matters, his ideas differed from ours. To quote Maspero, "Manners were easy in Egypt. Maturity came quickly to the girl, who lived in a world where the laws and customs seemed calculated to inflame

## ANCIENT EGYPT

her natural ardour. As a child, she and her brothers played together in a state of absolute nudity. When she grew up it was considered modish to expose the bosom, and to wear garments so transparent that nothing was hidden from the eyes of men. The maids who waited on her guests and her husband in town wore nothing but a narrow girdle round the hips ; and in the country the peasants threw off their one garment as they started work on her fields. In her religion and the religious ceremonies she attended there were obscene manifestations of the godhead, and the hieroglyphs she used when she wrote paraded lewd pictures before her. The mention of love did not, as with the modern girl, conjure up visions of an ideal love, but merely a clear and precise image of its physical side. The woman to whom the notion of adultery came could not brook the smallest delay ; but one asks oneself whether there were more

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE women with this idea in Egypt than elsewhere ? ”

Without endeavouring to answer the distinguished Egyptologist's question, we may recall the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and a precisely similar adventure that befell a certain Anoupou, as related in the *Tale of Two Brothers*, which dates back to the XIXth dynasty.

Prostitution, also, was quite differently regarded by the Egyptians. The Pharaoh, in the *Story of Rhampsinitus*, prostitutes his daughter so that he may obtain the name of the king who has robbed him of his treasure. Cheops does the like to procure the money required for the completion of his pyramid ; it needed but a few jewels to induce the divine wife of Baïti to betray her husband and become the king's favourite ; and Thouboui, in the *Adventure of Satni-Khamois with the Mummies*, gives herself to Satni as soon as the agreed sum has been paid.

## ANCIENT EGYPT

All these things are told without any suggestion of blame or surprise on the part of the narrator. It is true that these stories merely belong to the folklore ; but they will probably convey the spirit of the time in which they were written more faithfully than strictly historical documents.

And yet, for all these vagaries, the Egyptian was brought up to love justice, and above all truth ; and truth formed the foundation of his whole moral code. The true and the just were so closely interwoven in his mind that he had only one word to express them both, as he had only one for falsehood and evil. " Speak what is true, do what is true, let all thy actions conform with the truth, because truth is great, and mighty, and abiding, and to attain its limits is to attain beatitude " ; this was instilled into him from his earliest childhood. And yet he could be the least bit deceitful at times, for after his death

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

he lied most brazenly to the gods, bluffing them as readily as though it were all merely a game of poker. Matter of fact as he is, wideawake as we would say to-day, there are still vast tracts of *naïveté* and ingenuousness in his heart and his mind. Although obsessed with the idea of the tomb, he remains all the time a kind of grown-up child, though a dreadfully serious child. He believes blindly whatever the priests tell him, and Heaven knows they take advantage enough of his credulity ! Not content with his little, insignificant life here below, he yearns for an existence beyond that shall be vast, and complex, and fantastic, and pompous. He proceeds to create terrifying phantoms for himself, thousands of incredible monsters ; he deifies all that is around him and eventually his own soul ; and of his gods he frames conceptions that are wildly ridiculous, foolish and extravagant.

## ANCIENT EGYPT

We have now taken a brief and cursory glance at a civilisation which, though its qualities were but mediocre, endured for more than four thousand years. It is, with that of China, the longest that history has ever known. For forty centuries, while the rest of the world was given over to barbarism massacre, brigandage, rapine, and monstrous disorder, it procured for the people who lived under it a happiness and tranquillity, security and peace, that might well be envied by the people of to-day who rank among the most fortunate.

What were the forces that kept this civilisation together ? Obviously, and above all, the priestly oligarchy that held the reins, an oligarchy of wise and thoughtful men who jealously guarded their secret ; while above them were kings not only by divine right but actually divine, the monarch not being merely the representative of the god on earth but the god himself, and so

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

concretely and actually god that no one, himself to begin with, for one instant doubted his divinity, of which he was so sincerely, so deeply convinced that he worshipped his own image and did it obcisance.

But there were other peoples who were governed by prudent oligarchies and kings who held themselves to be gods, and that yet did not last long. In the Egyptian people as in the Chinese, side by side with the divine authority that strengthened the social edifice from its base to its crown, there existed a certain force that never left them, an authority humbler than the other but more effective, inasmuch as it permeated, saturated the entire organism ; and this was the obsession of death and the adoration of the corpse. Strangely enough, wherever the thought of death is uppermost, persistent, and paramount, life takes a firmer grip, quickens, multiplies, flourishes. The two civilisations that

## ANCIENT EGYPT

endured the longest, that were the most stable and tranquil of all that are known to us, had the same ideal: a coffin. Can this be the ideal that best serves humankind? The ideal of material happiness, whatever bliss it may lead to, has never brought content to man; it destroys more rapidly than it builds, and ends only in disaster. The spiritual ideal of the great religions has its abode in altitudes that only few can attain. But the humble ideal of a posthumous life and dwelling that shall be more or less the same as those one has left here, and of uncertain duration—this is a dream within the reach of every man, one that every man can understand. It is, if we may attach any faith to the experiments and still very contestable affirmations of our psychologists, the least extravagant, perhaps, of all the conceptions that man has formed of his future, and the only one which has some faint chance of realisation. And it must be

## THE SPIRITUAL ATMOSPHERE

remembered that this ancient religion of the Pharaohs, however fantastic and at times grotesque its setting may have been, still remained in its essence a very reasonable religion, and one that, stripped of the follies and extravagances added to please the crowd, connects with the greatest hypotheses. At the least, this accessible ideal lifts existence on to a plane where time, and the good and evil happenings of the day, may brush against it but cannot harm. It provides a channel for man's hopes and illusions, his dreams and bold ambitions. It gives imagination a foothold; it leads to a Beyond whence there is no desire to stray. It teaches resignation and patience. It does not dissolve life in the infinite, but offers a broader scope, a wider horizon, and a sure and attainable goal.